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ABSTRACT

This brief address was given by a Australian dairy farmer, who served as a parent representative on a committee of teachers at a local school. The speaker draws his observations from his experience "bridging the gap" between teachers' understanding of school operations and the views of rural parents. Rural values, or "peasant philosophy," is defined as an old system of beliefs among people who are rooted to the land, drawing their sense of pride and purpose from hard physical work. Peasant philosophy is conservative and traditional. Although it doesn't change much from place to place, those who subscribe to it are loyal to their home territory. Rural people also possess a perception of time that extends across generations, and they generally mistrust far-away, official sources of power. For all these reasons, communication with rural people can be difficult. Such people communicate with each other differently (and better) than they do with outsiders. The speaker recommends that inexperienced rural teachers be prepared for their work by being given research data, as well as information on rural values, useful local information, and "workable strategies." The address includes several colorful anecdotes and rural sayings to illustrate the speaker's points. (TES)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

# TRADITIONAL VALUES AND RURAL EDUCATION

(Peasant Philosophy)

John McFaul,
Dairy Farmer,
Tilba, New South Wales.

It is now after four o'clock and you have been sitting here and listening to views on education for almost two days. The speakers have been very good, very skillful and persuasive.....just as a measure of self defence, let's pause for a moment and think about something else - nothing to do with education. I want you to think about the things that made Old England great. There were three things that made England great and those three things are - constitution, institution, and pros ..... Peniy!

The strength of a conference like this lies upon the floor. What we presenters have to say has no real value or importance until you take it and fit it into the framework of your experience, your knowledge and your expertise. It is upon this basis, that I'd like to offer you a parent's perspective.

I'm a dairy farmer. It is not a particularly noble sort of thing to be. That's because farmers, in general terms, produce food and clothing. So when we get classified according to our occupation, farmers go into the group of those who earn their money by caring for other people's bodies. That is, farmers go in the same group as doctors and dressmakers, and chemists and cosmeticians.

If you want to belong to a better group than that one, then you must remember that minds are superior to bodies and take a job where you will influence the way in which people think. You might consider becoming an educator. There are lots of them - mothers, I always think of, but also authors, artists and advertisers, T.V. producers, even politicians try to influence the way in which people think. Supreme amongst all these is that group of professional, full time educators who care for the nation's young.

The only way that this group could discover just what they achieve, and then proceed to do it more effectively and more cheaply, would be to set up an experiment. They would have to take a group of young people and allow them access to all the educative processes in the community except schooling, then at the end of twenty years they would be able to identify and measure the differences.

When I was growing up there was still a number of old men at home who had never gone to school and who would have been used as reference points in just such a study. Remembering what those old chaps were like to talk with, has left me with a couple of strong impressions. First one is that we all learn a great deal of what we know outside the classroom. Second,

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and even stronger, is the belief in how lucky each of us has been to have had formal access to the riches of civilisation, to literature, history and philosophy, to the concepts of maths and science and to all the practical skills that schools teach.

If you educate yourself, you will become very individualistic. This can even extend to an individual use of language. I recall one of those old chaps who had never gone to school and talking to me about a mutual aquaintance he said, "Oh, no, no, no. You're too hard on him. You should remember that he's only a poor little b___, and he's had no chance in life. He's got no mother, and he's got no father. He's what they call a double orphan."

At the other end of the scale, if we are going to insist upon universal education, then we must take care not to fall into the insensitivities of mass production.

The first time I became aware that there was some kind of greater power behind our teacher was when I was in primary school. Someone happened to tell me that 'they' had just brought in a new syllabus for primary schools in N.S.W. I had a dreadful vision of all the primary schools in the state, with 100,000 kids sitting at 100,000 desks and churning out 99,000 versions of the same lessons. The missing one percent, of course, is made up of those kids who aren't co-operating that day. It is no worry having one percent missing, providing that the group keeps varying, so that every student receives 198 days of effective schooling and two days in which to play mule. However, it does become a matter of considerable concern if we discover that the uncoo-operative students are being drawn from the same portion of the school community on too many occasions.

The high school where my kids go was placed on the Disadvantaged Schools Program. With the exquisite efficiency that our N.S.W. bureaucrats use, the school was informed of its inclusion just before the submissions were due for next year. So we rushed about and formed a school committee. It was made up of interested teachers, some of the best people on our staff, plus one token parent. In order to validate what we were going to ask for, the committee sent out a circular to survey perceptions of the school's functions, needs and priorities. The survey went to the pupils in yrs 9 and 11, all members of staff and to each of our 212 families. Our school committee saw this circular as being entirely standard and predictable.

I persuaded them to add a note to the circular telling parents that, if they needed additional information or had any questions, they should ring the school or if it was in the evening they could ring me. The school did not receive any enquiries but on the two evenings available I got seventeen phone calls. That's eight per cent. I found myself answering the same questions over and over so I made a note of the things I was asked three times or more.

These parents looked at the circular and said, "I've read this stuff the school has sent out but I don't understand it. What is it all about? What does the school want? If we send in an idea will anyone take any notice? How would they improve literacy and numeracy? What's stopping them now? What do you mean by Parental courses? Give me some examples. Why do they want computers? Why do they need that particular number? What is it that they are going to teach our kids on computers? What is this stuff about Careers and Job Skills? Who is going to teach that? What is Peer Counselling? Why do they want to take our kids on excursions? Wouldn't they be better off in school learning something?

What struck me was the gap between the thinking of our school committee and the perceptions of at least portion of our school community: not only the existence of this gap but also the need to build bridges between the two parties.

When one focuses on Rural Education, the gap which most needs bridging is between teachers who are inexperienced in rural living and the most rural portion of any country area to which they are sent. It is only fair to our teachers to tell them what we mean by 'rural values'; what we mean by 'urban/rural differences'. Clearly there cannot be a rural belief system unless it has a philosophical base. At this stage in world civilisation, all our philosophies exist in written form. We are not dealing in secrets - we are not dependent on word of mouth. So the task is to take that existing material, draw it into useful and useable forms and deliver same to those who need it. By increasing understanding and suggesting strategies we can help 'new' rural teachers to carry out their professional duties.

Let's make a start on clarifying and codifying the basis of our rural values. What we are describing is Peasant Philosophy. I am not talking about peasants on the basis of occupation. I'm certainly not defining peasants on some measure of affluence. It is not that. What I am talking about is a set of values which has its roots in the past and which persists among some parts of our rural communities.

Peasant philosophy is very old; it is persistent through time and it is consistant across national boundaries and despite very different cultural backgrounds. We actually find almost identical samples of philosophy coming from opposite sides of the world. For instance, in Norfolk, when talking about farm management they refer to the eye of the Master: "The eye of the master fatteneth the cattle", and in China we find the same thought in slightly different words, "There is no better fertiliser than the footsteps of the owner".

Those who follow peasant philosophy draw some of their pride, their self-esteem and some of their sense of purpose from work, but the work they beleive in is hard, physical work. There is plenty of evidence to support the existence of this attitude but I'll quote three examples, drawn from varying sources: -

"Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn".
"The labourer is worthy of his hire;" and one that is more modern and a bit sharper in tone, "You wouldn't keep a dog and bark yourself".

I went out one year buying corn - maize to be precise, and came to a farm where there was corn ready to sell. It was in the barn but the farmer was horribly embarrassed because he wasn't fit enough to do his share of the work of loading the bags of corn. What had happened to him was this. He had gone out digging tussocks and a rabbit jumped up out of the tussocks and ran for its home in the blackberry patch beside the creek. So he swung his mattock up above his head and chased that rabbit as hard as he could. As the two of them went over the bank of the creek together he caught the toe of his boot in a blackberry vine, pitched forward off balance and smashed the point of his shoulder against the base of a telegraph pole. So he had a bad arm and couldn't work hard. He was 78 years old. When we went to look at the corn, his wife, who was two years older than he was, came with us. We opened the doors of the barn and all their half grown chickens flooded in and began pecking up the loose grains. As we were leaving I asked the old lady if I could help her chase the chickens out and she said, "Oh no, they won't eat more than they can hold

you know."

Peasant philosophy is old and it is also old fashioned, conservative and traditional. You will find very little support in this portion of a rural community for any of our modern social movements. You are unlikely to find any members of Animal Liberation, any Greenies or even much sympathy for the unfortunates who are dying from A.I.D.S. As the Mexicans point out to us, "You don't build a house upon the ground, you build a home around a woman," and that was written as a tribute.

Those who subscribe to peasant philosophy are likely to be long term residents and this fact creates a particular way of seeing things. They believe that they live at home, always have, and that other people are outsiders, newcomers and strangers. Consequently they claim ownership, the right to set the agenda and to issue the invitations to join in, if they choose. We can perceive this attitude in the little names that each state has invented for its new settlers. In Victoria they talk about "Collins St. farmers", in Queensland they refer to the "Gold Coast Cowboys" and in the Soviet Union they say, "Alien ways do not suit the Russian corn". Alien means anyone who comes from more than fifty miles away!

One difference in rural living is the slower pace of life. This has been well documented, sometimes idealistically as in poems like "Clancy of the Overflow" and sometimes derisively in comments on bovine stupidity. However both of these views are too simplistic - country living does not consist of doing the same things more leisurely. Rural people have a perception of time which involves continuity and a sense of fruition. When one can look backwards over three generations and also forwards for another two, there is a strong sense of belonging to a developing process. On my farm I plant trees and some of these are now thirty years old and yet they still look young within their landscape. The involvement of country people in the natural rythms of the seasons nurtures a belief in patience and a sense of fruition.

"One cannot harvest ere one sows the seed" and "Don't be making jam with green berries".

Those who belong to this group see themselves as small, independent operators who are threatened by far off official sources of power. They are suspicious of, and antagonistic towards, those who exercise the power. Look at these three quotes.

"Never push the big chariot. Your reward will be the dust", CHINA

"It is no use putting up a sign which reads 'Please don't pick the blossoms', if they stand in the path of the wind - for the wind cannot read". JAPAN

"Look out for the government! It'll crush you."

"Look out for the priests! They'll starve you."

The priests who are complained of in that third quote would be Bhuddists, but the same feeling of suspicion exists in our own communities. I called in one day to see an old family friend who was dying of cancer. Whilst I was there, another one of the locals came in to pay a debt and he put down $300 in cash on the little table beside the bed. The old chap raised his head from the pillow and said, "Don't put it there! Haven't you got any sense? The minister's coming this afternoon."

Communication is difficult with a small, well established group dealing in a limited pool of information, most of which is already known. There are rules, but it is unlikely that these will be told to you because if you were the right sort of person you would know them already. In

addition, members of the group do not especially believe in communication. As the Portugese tell us, "Unwanted conversation is like the dropping of rotten fruit from a tree in the night". The Scotch agree, but put it in their own words, "You keep your own fish-guts for your own sea gulls".

At home, if we hold a school function and the principal's wife does a particularly good job of moving around and making sure that she speaks to everyone, then her efforts are likely to be rewarded with the comment, "She was buzzing round the place like a blowfly".

One thing to be wary of is the fact that those who follow peasant philosophy will communicate with outsiders on a superficial level, whilst talking to each other in a meaningful way.

In Bega there was a garage owner who also owned a fishing shack on the coast at Merimbula, about twenty miles away. One summer there was a bushfire south of the town which was worrying him, so he rang the policeman in Merimbula and enquired about risk to his property. "No danger at all!", the policeman replied, "That fire is miles away".

The garage owner waited about an hour and a half. It seemed to him that the smoke looked much worse so he put a load of water on his truck, rigged up a fire fighting pump and then rang the policeman again. The policeman said "Just a minute, I'll go outside and check". When he came back, his verdict was. "That fire is all on the hills to the southwest of the town. It won't go anywhere near your place". The garage owner thought to himself, "Bloody hell it won't!" He then jumped into his truck and went like a scalded cat.

Luckily he made it just in time. By dark, he felt that the danger was over and that his building was safe. He drove into Merimbula, went to the public phone booth and rang up the policeman again. Then he said, "This is me, again. Before I go to bed, I'd like to ask you about that fire but I hope I'm not being a nuisance." "No trouble," said the policeman, "it's all over. The fire's gone past and you can go off to bed and have a good nights' sleep." The garage owner said, "Well, thanks very much," and the policeman replied, "That's alright. After all, that's what we're here for."

Let's draw our characteristics together thus far. Following peasant philosophy tends to produce individuals whose values are distinctive and well suited to life in rural areas. Their beliefs are persistent through time and consistent across national or cultural boundaries. They are conservative, old fashioned and traditional, they claim ownership of where they live, the right to set the agenda and to issue invitations when they choose, they take pride in hard work, identify with where they live and are inimical to change, suspicious of and antagonistic towards outside official sources of power. They communicate with each other rather than as an open process of sharing.

I would suggest that an inexperienced rural teacher deserves a package containing -

1. A resume of research findings.
2. Useful local information.
3. Understanding of rural values.
4. Some workable strategies.

This brings me to Motive and Method. I think we have a moral obligation to take action. As the Spanish say, "Honour doesn't move sideways like a crab." That's Motive.

Every year, about May, farmers do a trial run on their income tax figures. This is just in case they happened to have any money on which they might have to pay income tax. "Look out for the government! It'll crush you."

One year I hired a local contractor to replace portion of the boundary fence. He was a big bloke and he had worked outdoors all his life. He was sunburnt and wind burned, frost bitten, hard bitten and flea bitten, as rough as barbed wire. In fact, I think he wore his clothes out from the inside. Whenever I was working close to his job, we shared lunchtime together and after a few days he offered me some advice on Method.

He said, "The way you work is wrong. You ought to be more like me. When you have a bit of work to do, you go in like a bull at a gate, but when I have a problem, I like to think my way through it." He gave me an example so that I would understand how to do it.

"You know that I manage that place of McAllisters. Well, we've got Johnson for a neighbour and Johnson thinks he's smart. Everytime there's a flood in the creek, the fence gets flattened and Johnson puts his horses out on that side and they come through and they eat McAllister's grass. That was the problem but I waited until I had thought my way through it and then I went over and saw Johnson."

I said to him, "Listen, ugly. The next time there's a flood in the creek and your horses get into McAllisters, I'll tell you what's going to happen. First off, I'll gather up those horses and I'll get behind them with the whip and the dogs. They'll come down the far fenceline. Flat strap, over that little rise and straight into that cross fence. You're going to have cut legs and screaming horses all over your flat. Then, I'll come over here to you and I'll start off by knockin' your teeth down into your guts. Then I'll get hold of you, like this, see! And I'll shake you, like this, see! until everyone of those teeth come dropping out again."

"There's been two floods in the creek since Johnson and me had our little talk together - and there's been no trouble!"

So this is what I am recommending to you, ladies and gentlemen. Don't go in like a bull at a gate. Try to think your way through the problem.